

Managing bipolar disorder during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic presents people with bipolar disorder (BD), as well as their friends, family, and care providers, with additional challenges related to some of the following issues:

- Regularity and structure are very important for people with BD. The pandemic has disrupted many routines.
- Many of the measures advocated to curtail the spread of COVID-19, such as home confinement, social distancing, lockdowns, and quarantines, may disrupt habitual patterns of sleep and wakefulness as well as the number and quality of social contacts and activities. The result may be increased risk of manic and depressive relapses.
- Consistent treatment is vital for people with BD, but isolation and quarantine might interfere with regular appointments and getting medications.
- Social isolation distances people with BD from their support networks.
- Fear of illness and concerns about the health of loved ones can increase agitation.
- Large-scale loss of life and grief for the disappearance of a way of life can seem overwhelming to someone in a BD depressive episode.
- Being in isolation or under quarantine can be extremely difficult for people experiencing mania or hypomania episodes.
- The continued sales of alcohol for home consumption may increase use in people with BD, who are already at a higher risk of comorbid alcohol use disorder.
- Risk-taking behavior in persons with BD predisposes them to COVID-19. They may ignore stay-at-home orders, not take their medications, and not maintain a routine.
- Treatment may be disrupted or offered by telehealth. Many people may not have internet access or may not be comfortable with this format.

The following coping strategies can help people with BD navigate the challenges posed by COVID-19.

- Acknowledge that these are stressful times and recognize that feeling concerned is understandable.
- Set a goal of managing feelings as they manifest.
- Establish a schedule for work, relaxation, and socializing, while maintaining physical distancing.
- Eat regular, healthy meals.
- Establish and follow good sleep habits.
- Spend some time outside each day.
- Stay physically active by walking, running, biking, or using free online exercise options.
- Participate in various relaxing and engaging activities, such as cooking, reading, and doing cross-word puzzles.
- Try to move therapy sessions online. Virtual therapy is a great option for those without access to their usual sessions.
- Work with a pharmacy to arrange medication delivery.

Patients with BD may find podcasts from the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance helpful. They can be accessed at dbsalliance.org/covid-19.